

HOUSE PASSES BILL TO WAIVE STUDENT LOAN OBLIGATIONS FOR U.S. TROOPS

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WASHINGTON - U.S. Representative Tom Udall, D-N.M., today reported that the House easily approved important legislation designed to ensure U.S. military reservists called to active duty are not forced to make payments on federal student loans while they are overseas.

The measure, H.R. 1412, the Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students Act of 2003 (HEROES), would ensure support for military personnel by allowing the U.S. Secretary of Education to provide the appropriate assistance and flexibility to our men and women in uniform as they transfer in and out of postsecondary education during a time of war.

"We must ensure that institutions of higher education are flexible and accommodating to the students called up for duty as they deploy and return to the classroom," Udall said. "This bipartisan legislation will make the process of finally earning a college degree more seamless for these young Americans and their families."

Some of the men and women serving in the Persian Gulf conflict are U.S. military reservists who are college and university students, and many of these students participate in federal financial aid programs. The HEROES legislation would extend waiver authority that allows the U.S. Secretary of Education to excuse such military personnel from their federal student loan obligations while they are on active duty in the service of their nation.

For example, the families of military reservists who left their jobs when called to active duty could be relieved from making student loan payments during the time of service, and the families of borrowers serving on active duty can get relief from collection calls from lenders while the conflict is taking place.

The bill would ask postsecondary institutions to provide a full refund of tuition and fees to students for the period they were not able to complete because of their service, and would minimize deferral of enrollment or reapplication requirements, making it easier for military personnel to reenter their postsecondary education when they return from active duty.

It would also encourage lending institutions holding or servicing federal student loans to provide all available benefits, deferrals, and flexibility to ensure the men and women of our armed services are not placed in an adverse financial position because of their service. HEROES also allows the Secretary of Education to quickly react to situations not yet existing in order to provide the flexibility and protections necessary to best assist military personnel with the transition to and from postsecondary education as they work to serve our nation.

In addition to covering students called to active duty, the bill applies to anyone who lives in or is employed in an area declared to be a disaster area in connection with a national emergency, or anyone who has suffered direct economic hardship as a result of a war or other military operation.

The measure has now been referred to the Senate for consideration.
Udall currently serves on the House Veterans Affairs Committee